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Learning to meet (or how to talk to chairs)

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Abstract.

This chapter considers formalized meetings in local authorities, (or councils), primarily in Britain and Norway. Such local authorities, instances of the state at the local level, use standard formats for meetings between elected representatives, administrators and other participants. These meetings may vary in formality, in content, length, location or size, but they share a format that gives them legitimacy on behalf of the state. Participants have somehow to learn these formats and how to use them for different purposes. Some of the learning is implicit social learned practice, and some is explicit. I consider two instances of learning how to ‘do’ meetings where tacit and coercive norms are made explicit, which provide the exceptions to the rule of meeting-practices as tacit, learned, normative assumptions about ‘proper’ practice.

Meeting bureaucracy

Interest in the bureaucracy of politics has been intense since Weber’s analysis of the separation of power, and Foucault’s essay on the governance of governance (1978/91). The work of Miller, Rose and others (Miller 1992, Rose, 1991, 1994) in identifying accounting as a governmental technology has been enormously influential in defining an approach to understanding government through a close examination of its technologies, both material and social. Yet the focus on numbers (Hacking 1990) overshadowed the importance of other bureaucratic practices in these analyses. In the context of this volume, it makes sense to consider bureaucratic meetings as a technology of government, which both enables and is, itself, government. Abrams’ (1977) notes on the difficulty of studying the state are a useful reminder that concepts such as ‘state’ and ‘government’ are abstract and instrumental. In invoking the state and the governing of people and things, we simultaneously reinforce the impression that they exist. To paraphrase Abrams,

the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of council meetings, it is itself the mask which prevents our seeing meetings as they are¹ (Ibid.: 58). Schwartzmann (1989) has made a convincing argument that organizations are constituted through the practices of their participants, building on wide-ranging arguments in anthropology about the effectiveness of rituals in transforming both persons and social arrangements. Latour and Woolgar can be read in the same vein, as arguing that science is made of the sum of activities of its adherents (1986). It is timely, then, to focus on the meeting as an exemplary form through which the ontology of politics can be explored. In particular, I address the intersection of ontology and temporality, by asking how such practices are reproduced. How do participants become tuned into these practices, how do they begin to share in the repetitive practice of being the state, or, in other words, how do they/we learn to enact the universalizing technology of government that I suggest meetings to be.

What does it mean to talk of meetings as universalizing technologies of government? The phrase draws on histories of colonial practice and international circuits of management practice. Just as signposts render a landscape legible to wayfarers (see Ween and Abram 2012), the standard form of meetings, with agendas, minutes, apologies, items, other business, etcetera, offers a navigable system that can be used and adapted around the globe. Once learned, these tools can be applied in many different contexts. The spread of a bureaucratic system, hastened by colonial control, and perpetuated by global multi-national organizations, provides a veneer of legibility to governing systems around the world. Certainly there are anthropologists who have explored the variability that lies underneath the apparent uniformity of the system, but the form of the governmental meeting is unified enough to be recognizable despite local differences, offering the potential for a class of global political elites to enter into the system to some extent in many different locations. I do not underestimate the variation between implementations of the meeting-form, but highlight its success both in its ubiquity, and in its invisibility in plain sight. This invisibility – by which I mean the manner in which it is taken for granted – makes it an ideal ethnographic fact, about which to ask how different people in particular places come to learn the varied skills that are needed to master the art of managing meetings. The basic rules may appear simple, but they are further reaching than they may appear at first encounter, are largely tacit, and their mastery is complex.

The complexity of governmental bureaucratic meeting rules is illustrated in the work of Walter Citrine, at one time General Secretary to the Trades Union Congress (UK), who published a guide in 1939 to the correct chairmanship of meetings. As such, it is a kind of normative ethnographic guide to current practice, committing to the form of a rule-book the kinds of practices that were then common and considered correct. Practices have since changed, but Citrine's 'ABC of Chairmanship' (1939) is a remarkably rare entity. Although there are clearly

common (and disputed) principles for the management of meetings in local state authorities, it is not at all common to see explicitly stated rules.

In fact, Sir Walter Citrine acknowledges in his guide that there are no legal rules of debate, but that associations tend to draw up their own rules or 'standing orders'. These orders tend to be rather similar, which is why Citrine was able to draw up a general guide in the first place, and he suggests a number of ways in which the practice of holding meetings can be considered to be a social fact worthy of ethnographic exploration. The similarity of meeting forms make them into a universalizing modern practice in which participants may engage in the disciplinary processes of the state; indeed, some participants enact the state through the kind of disciplinary processes and actions that I will describe in the chapter. In this context, the existence – or even the potential imagined existence – of a book of rules can be invoked to control situations of conflict or contest. If local politics can be defined as an arena where conflicting interests are pursued, then in this context, meetings are one of the primary mechanisms for managing an orderly progression through complex processes.

It is my contention, then, that the skills and knowledge needed to be effective at running municipal meetings are rarely contained in the written rules and regulations pertaining to municipal procedures. On the contrary, participants learn from each other in the meeting context, learning in the process how to interpret, manipulate and bend whatever formal rules exist. There may be individuals who read Citrine (and his equivalents) and proceed according to his recommendations, and there is an industry of publishing about good meeting-practices, but by and large in the situations where I have attended municipal meetings, practices are continually being taught and/or learned in meetings themselves. As noted above, I am largely referring to meetings of municipal councils, and, more specifically, meetings of planning-related committees in Norway and England², although the cases discussed below are both from Norway. These include both official administrative meetings, meetings between political committees and their administrative support staff and meetings between planning officials or elected representatives and members of what they call the public. The context is thus of different forms of modern Western democracies, and the ways that these democracies are pursued in practice through the form of the meeting.

Considering such meetings in isolation is plainly impossible, since they take place in a broader municipal context, in a time-horizon either circular or linear, depending on perspective. As Schwartzman takes pains to demonstrate (1989), meetings can be thought of as punctuation in the progress of activities in complex organizations, functioning only with the support of the

relations that are practiced around the actual moment of the meeting itself. However, taking the meeting as the focus of analysis can be considered as a classic ethnographic tactic, since the meeting becomes the lens through which municipal politics (in this instance) can be explored (see Peacock 2001). The form, that of the municipal meeting that appears to be so similar across national and social boundaries, offers a means of comparison, shedding light on the activities and relations that are practiced around and through the meeting, becoming a vehicle for the analysis of political process. These practices of governance are supported by all sorts of material tools, from documents to furnishings, to objects of prestige that lend authority and legitimacy to the meeting and the agreements reached – or announced – within them (see below, and Abram and Wieszkalnys 2013). In other words, anthropological approaches to politics through the object of meetings have much to learn from studies of ritual in its broadest conceptualization. This includes the admission that starting with a universalizing term (‘ritual’, ‘marriage’, ‘politics’) is the contradiction at the heart of anthropological study that aims to avoid ethnocentrism, and yet starting with a familiar form is the means by which we embark on any comparative project, by assembling items that we believe to be somehow comparable, making what Marilyn Strathern calls ‘partial connections’, where homology is impossible (1991).

If Citrine aimed to assemble a set of standards based on the broad range of common and accepted practices, formulating a doctrine from the variety of organizations and institutions he addressed, then his intention was implicitly to iron out differences. The trend continues, with Tropman (2014), for example, broadening the context into the expansive definition of ‘decision-groups’, making his modern-day Citrine into an even broader universalizing guide. There are many such guides to holding effective meetings, largely in the context of business or company management, where it is possible to see sometimes moralized, sometimes banal interpretations of what a meeting is and how it should (normatively) proceed. These guides tend to do the opposite of ethnography, placing little emphasis on the detail of current practice, and much on the functional or instrumental purpose of the meeting. In laying down normative principles, they further the notion that meetings are neutral as form, that they can be applied anywhere, and that they should follow rational rules and procedures. Considering meetings instead as an ethnographic object, it becomes possible to see the range of learning that is happening through meetings, both in terms of the stated aims to be achieved through meeting with others, and in terms of learning how to do meetings themselves.

Form and function

Despite very different legal structures, political histories and local practices, the everyday life of bureaucratic institutions in Western democracies is, as noted, remarkably recognizable from one

to another. So remarkable, in fact, that it is relatively easy for us to locate the differences in manner, language, procedure and documentation than it would be for systems that were entirely different. In one sense, it should not be surprising that European (and other) bureaucratic political systems are similar, given the history of European inter-colonization, such that governmental practice and procedure has been imported and imposed between various European countries over the centuries. As a former colony of Denmark, and with a former union with Sweden, we might expect that Norway would share bureaucratic systems with other Scandinavian countries (see Rian 2003), and through the Swedish connection, we might expect to see some similarities with French governance, since Sweden – and by default Norway – had a French king, ‘Karl Johan’, alias Jean Bernadotte 1763-1844, former Minister of War to Napoleon. We might also note that ‘good practice’ remains constantly in circulation between European countries, not least through the promotion of intra-European projects, and through the activities of international consultants seeking opportunities in the public sector. Governance practices are explicitly imposed or imported through international aid and collaboration partnerships as well. Whatever the cause, it can be said that the daily life of government – and governmentality – is substantially recognizable from one country to another.

Among of the most recognizable features are the practice and documentation of meetings, including those in local government of the kind I have participated in, primarily in England, Norway and France, as part of various ethnographic projects. In each of these instances, a relative lack of formal training in meeting practice is common. While some civil servants do undergo training in writing agendas and minutes, few politicians who chair or participate in meetings are involved in any substantial formal training. Much bureaucratic time is spent on teaching and training in less formal ways, however. One model of learning that helps to understand these forms is that developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), and discussed by Gillian Evans in her 2006 book on situated learning. Evans emphasizes how learning is a social process, in which the object of learning and the social context in which it occurs are inextricably linked. Elements of social prestige are tied to the ability to gain skills and knowledge in arenas of value, while value is attributed as a social process³, rather than as a fixed characteristic. While Evans is concerned with the way working class children learn to be full social participants, her approach is important in exploring non-formal routes to learning and can be applied to the context of public political activities, as we will see below.

Lave and Wenger’s theory of situated peripheral participation highlights the everyday learning that adults, as well as children undertake, as part of the performance of social personhood. In brief, the argument is that the learning we do as peripheral participants to a social process is akin to the learning of an apprentice. Gradually picking up insight into the situation through

‘proximal’ and experiential learning, we slowly become more expert in our knowledge and skills, our ability to judge a situation and the repertoire of responses on which we can draw to act effectively in a given context, as we begin to take on a more significant role in the situation. This kind of experiential learning is, in fact, acknowledged by many professional organizations, who require suitably qualified people to demonstrate experience of practice before being eligible for full membership of chartered institutions (including, in the UK, medicine, engineering and planning institutes, see Abram 2011: 136). For elected representatives, administrators and others, learning to be an effective actor in municipal government usually requires such a process of gradual inclusion, first observing, trying and gradually becoming more skilled in exploiting the opportunities that meetings offer to achieve desired outcomes.

If much learning is both social and informal, it is also often tacit, and the ethnographic project may include an attempt to draw out that learning, not to generate an explicit guide or manual to practices, but to explore the routes of learning, and to expose the inequalities it may generate, and to demonstrate the processes of exclusion and inclusion, empowerment and disempowerment that such tacit learning often entails. With this in mind, it is possible to ask where people actually learn how to ‘do’ meetings?

Learning by doing.

In the small, functional community hall in the Stølsheimen community in western Norway, the district council is getting ready to hold its monthly meeting. Large thermos flasks of coffee stand on the melamine tables as people take their seats on the modern wooden chairs upholstered in office-burgundy. The table is soon littered with papers, files and coffee cups and the buzz of chatter dies down as the Mayor stands to call the meeting to order. His seat is at the head of the table, with the Chief Executive of the council at his side as secretary to the meeting and behind them a whiteboard on the wall. A few observers (myself included) sit away from the opposite end of the table, between the open room-dividers and partly in the adjoining function room, but most of the dozen chairs set out for observers are empty. The meeting is open to anyone who wants to attend, but a routine meeting does not attract very many citizens. Meeting papers are given to everyone, including observers, and they include a copy of the agenda, and a discussion paper. The mayor gets the meeting underway by welcoming the participants, particularly those who have not attended before. In the Norwegian system, each local elected representative has a deputy who attends meetings if the elected representative is unable to be present. Council members are elected on a list-system, and deputies are chosen from those candidates lower down the list who were not actually elected, but who were presented to the electorate as part of the

party list⁴. Unusually, in this district, the lists were not presented by political parties, but by groupings that roughly represent the two major settlements in the district⁵. In all, the population numbers only a few hundred residents, so the council is proportionally small, with only 13 members. Disputes tend to arise where the interests of residents in the two different settlements conflict, or where a good is seen to benefit one settlement over the other.

Many of the council meetings I had attended elsewhere were quite lively, with intense debate and vehement speeches, and some degree of chatter in the background. In comparison, this meeting is remarkably quiet. Each person stands as they speak, the rest of the participants sitting silently with modest attention, so that the meeting has the air of a Quaker church service, which is perhaps appropriate in this puritanical part of the country⁶. The mayor asks the attendees to confirm the minutes of the previous meeting, and goes through the matters arising from those minutes, informing the members of progress since that meeting, and listening to comments and questions about it. After a little while, one of the deputies begins to discuss an issue with another member across the table. The mayor interrupts her, politely, saying that as she is a new deputy who hasn't attended council meetings before, perhaps she hasn't understood the procedure. He explains that she must always address her comments to the chair of the meeting (himself), and not talk directly to other members. That is how council meetings are run. She apologizes, a little flustered, and tries to repeat her comments to the Mayor, somewhat deflated. The other councillor replies to the Mayor and the discussion peters out, the Mayor moving on to the next point on the agenda.

I have observed a classic moment of explicit social pedagogy, with the Mayor effectively communicating to the new participant, 'this is how we behave in meetings here', in a manner both polite and firm. The new participant learns what is considered appropriate in this setting through a didactic intervention and explanation of 'rules' that are otherwise taken for granted. She might also have observed from the practice of the other participants that this was the norm for the control of speech at this municipal meeting, but it is interesting to note that these kinds of norms are often only made explicit when they are breached. In common with many social norms, as long as they are followed they are effectively invisible, but when breached they provoke disciplinary action among other participants. The categories of tacit, experiential and situated learning do much to unpack the different ways that learning arises, but their formality simultaneously conceals the broad repertoire of chastisement, explicit pedagogy and social normativity that can be brought into reproducing meeting practices. Certainly, this example shows someone learning through experience, situated in a very particular context, in which a failure in tacit learning gives rise to explicit pedagogical action on the part of the chairperson.

The mayor, in this instance, could be described, indeed, as a good chair of a meeting. Participants in other municipal meetings had clear, common criteria for a ‘good chair’, that included a strong pedagogical element. The chair was skilled in keeping proceedings in order, and ensuring that everyone present understood how things should be done. With this reminder still fresh, the meeting continued in a most formal manner, despite the informality of the surroundings and the relaxed dress and seating arrangements of the participants. Through his intervention, the rules of behavior were clarified for all the participants, and all those present were disciplined into a shared set of expectations for meeting-practice, namely that at council meetings, speech is uni-directional, and this is not a setting either for general conversation or for arguments across the table. Procedure becomes explicit in such rare moments, where otherwise it remains implicit in the actual practices of the participants, from the banal to the crucial: members know that coffee will be served; they know already that they will stand when they have something to say and will avoid chatting while someone else is speaking, and they know they must address their comments to the Mayor and address him by his title. There are very many such rules that they have already internalized and which they experience as the kind of self-discipline that, as Foucault long ago remarked, form the basis of governing mentalities (1978, 1979).

Some disciplining effects are produced by material conditions, such as the form of language and format of documents circulated, or the formalized settings of some council chambers. Others are learned and internalized, whether or not they are evident in the material context. For example, the Weberian separation of politics and administration in Norway requires bureaucrats to learn a particular kind of discipline that some are unable to maintain (Abram 2004). In Norwegian municipal political meetings, administrators are required to observe a subservient position, remaining, like the ideal Victorian child, seen and not heard, silent unless spoken to. They are the servants of the political process, and like servants they conduct much of the policy work behind the scenes, presenting it in codified documents for discussion at council committee meetings. These kinds of discipline are relatively explicitly encoded, and staff are trained to understand their role and position. In principle, restricts communication between politicians and bureaucrats should be channeled via the person of the Chief Executive and the Mayor (two corporate bodies, in effect), or via others delegated by them. In practice, strict adherence to this code would make everyday local government grind to a halt, so bureaucrats (and politicians too) have to learn how the rules apply and how flexible they are. For example, if a bureaucrat were to telephone a politician to discuss a policy, they would soon be chastised, and the story of their error would undoubtedly run the round of office gossip so that all other bureaucrats would be aware that this was unacceptable. A politician may request information or advice from a bureaucrat, but such a

request should travel via the chair and secretary of the relevant committee, and any deviation from such a route would attract attention – the bureaucrat themselves would probably ask the question (ie, 'is this request from the committee?'), to ensure that the politician was not seeking private or party political benefit from information provided by the public servant. On the other hand, were a politician and a bureaucrat to meet in the corridor, or chat in the coffee-and-pastry pause of a meeting, they might naturally (or, possibly, guardedly) discuss one or two issues of interest. It is therefore on such occasions that politicians might become aware of some useful fact that they had not known to ask about. All such nuances outside the meeting itself complement the meeting – since all participants rapidly realize that knowledge of essential facts is a form of political power, as well as helping to ensure that policies are well-founded and are potentially effective.

In the different context of a large, wealthy municipality not far from the capital city in southern Norway, the discipline that governed administrators was particularly evident in everyday practice, such as through the physical layout of the council chamber, where full elected members sat directly at their specific places in the main hall, whilst administrators and other officers sat at the back with members of the public, waiting to be called if required. In the very formal council chamber, all public speech is amplified through single-speaker desk-microphones, and councillors make their interventions from a podium. In this context, the control of speech by physical infrastructure is very evident, since an attempt to intervene from behind the councillors' benches would be both poorly audible and demonstrably unconventional. For an administrator, sitting or standing (hanging around) at the back of the room, the walk to the chair's chair - or indeed to the podium in more formal council chambers - is a conspicuous act, and might be interpreted as assertive or intrusive, and indeed I never saw any administrator attempting this traverse without an invitation. Hence the physical layout of the room reinforced the idea that people without a seat were not part of the conversation, materializing the subservient position that bureaucrats learned to adopt. Many administrators preferred to be as inconspicuous as possible, while remaining available if called upon. They explained to me that last-minute interventions might be interpreted as an indication that the papers they had prepared for the meeting had not been adequate, an accusation they were keen to avoid. Physical layout and the use of papers thus reinforce the rules that administrators learn to avoid intervening in political debates.

The notion of 'order' is central to the council committee meeting, assuring the participants and observers that the world is proceeding according to recognized rules of engagement, and suggesting that work is being done, decisions made in a timely and just manner, and processes progressing. Elected council members know that they cannot just start to argue across the table,

but they are also vehement about their right to disagree, indeed it is their duty to disagree where politicians are elected to represent different interests.

At the same time, elected representatives and administrators learn very quickly that the business of the full council – that conducted in the most formal meetings in the Council Chamber - is largely symbolic, with decisions having been made in advance either in party meetings or in the preparatory sub-committee meetings. In any council with an overall majority, even if that majority is a coalition, most cases on the agenda in Council were up for ratification and publication, not for meaningful decisions. These full Council meetings form part of the legitimizing ritual of state procedure (as described in Abram and Wszkalnys 2013, and Abram 2011). Such ritual has an important role in the democratic process, since the council meeting is the event on which the public gaze is focused, allowing an image of the council-at-work to be disseminated and giving participants an opportunity to demonstrate their rhetorical, political and social skills.

Norwegian local government council meetings are open to the public (in some cases also regularly broadcast or webcast), so they become occasions on which politicians can also communicate with voters, demonstrating that their views are being communicated and considered, whether or not decisions go in their favor. In council meetings, a public case must be made to legitimize whatever decision being proposed, to ensure that the procedure appears to be fair, but there are other gains to be made. Skilled opposition speakers can cast doubt on the wisdom of the decisions ostensibly to be voted on but actually already reached in sub-committees; they can use the opportunity to promote alternatives either by setting out options or by seeding a new idea that they can come back to at a later opportunity; and politicians of all parties can mark themselves out as tactical and effective speakers, impressing their party colleagues in the hope of promotion within their own group. Politicians watch and learn from others whom they admire, and they learn to avoid the mistakes that others make, but such learning must also be reconciled with their expectations of moral and political norms. Hence, very strongly normative Norwegian ideals of transparency and openness in government mean that manipulative game-playing that may be admired in some contexts as skillful political maneuvering is more often interpreted negatively in the Norwegian context as dirty tricks. The kind of banal corruption taken for granted elsewhere (e.g. Gupta 1995) is considered inadmissible here – to the point where my tentative questions about corruption were considered out of place. In other words, the form of the political discipline in the Norwegian council was particular, while still recognizably taking the form of the municipal meeting. Meeting procedures do not remove power play from the business of municipal government, far from it, but they offer

an arena for such power-play to be rehearsed, so a key skill for politicians is learning how to use this symbolic arena to advantage.

For politicians, part of the experience they gain in such meetings entails learning the knowledge of how to perform disagreement, both in the sense of putting on a performance for the audience (including members present, public attending and those watching the debate on local television or online), and in the sense of acting on disagreement in an appropriate manner. This included their ability to represent effectively the interests of their constituents, and have a properly political debate without personalizing the argument between representatives. Politicians whom I worked with in Norway often remarked that they got along with members of different parties perfectly well and had respect for their views, yet they would argue vociferously that they were wrong in the debating chamber. Indeed, the more formal the debate, the more vociferous the arguments. One might speculate that formality in meetings offered safety barriers against the personalization of arguments, since each politician taking their place at the speaker's podium in the Council Chamber for their five minutes of speech was evidently playing a clear role, Councillor Normann, and not everyday Ellie Normann, part-time estate agent and mother of three. The less formal the meeting, the more convivial and less aggressive the argument, even if the positions taken by the participants were, in fact, equally intransigent. Learning how to manage these boundaries was often reinforced through what we might call gossip – discussions in corridors or over coffee in which transgressions were criticized. The council meeting, with its rules and procedures, and its material setting and props, offers some security in its separation of personal relations from political relations, so that politicians can adopt roles that need not interfere with their ability to work with people they disagree with in the future, and they are protected from personal attacks based on their political position. Politicians soon learn these benefits of a system that can otherwise appear formal or arcane, and those who become known as skilled politicians learn how to use the system to the advantage of their own party and their own political career.

On the administrative side, learning how to participate in meetings also requires some skill. At the time of my fieldwork in the Norwegian municipal town hall, the chief executive was transforming the organization along neoliberal, or new-public-management lines. While not quite as extreme as the kind of new-age business at that Salamon describes (2005), the idea that staff should 'be positive' was clearly emphasized. Criticism was interpreted as 'negativity', to be avoided, implying that bureaucrats were obliged to take great care in framing their professional opinion, and find subtle ways to resist the discipline that this management technique seemed to enforce. An on-going managerial reorganization offered the chief executive the opportunity to force employees to apply for newly-defined positions. In one administrative team meeting, the

chair announced that he had applied for one of the new posts, and had been told that he would not be appointed for that, nor any other post, since he had not been sufficiently supportive to the chief executive. He had openly voiced criticism of the chief executive's management decisions, and the result provided a lesson for all his colleagues (see also Abram 2004). It is possible to see that the playing out of this power struggle generated a particular kind of learning for his colleagues. For some, the lesson was to find a job elsewhere, while for others, it was to silence their critical thoughts. Later that day, one administrator met me for coffee in a nearby canteen, and entered into a kind of extended self-criticism, particularly of her difficulty in restraining her enthusiasm and energy for the service she ran. Her excitability, the very qualities that made her an effective champion for her service, worked against her opportunities for progressing in the organization, since she found it difficult to adopt the passive persona expected in meetings. While this is a rather extreme example that has as much to do with the particular management scenario in this organization, it also reflects the way that meeting-talk can have consequences beyond the meeting, which participants have to learn from, since meeting protocol over-rides the interests, personalities or preferences of individual participants.

What is striking, even in the relatively simple municipal meetings described above, is quite how much meeting-related skill, knowledge and practice has been internalized and is reproduced by the participants, and the extent to which meeting practice can be adapted to encompass such a wide range of issues and situations, a flexibility within boundaries that helps the formal meeting to endure as a political form across the world (see Richards and Kuper 1971). As Vike has described, debates held in committees and sub-committees draw on long-standing narratives and understandings about different party positions, that can be manipulated by smart administrators or spokespersons (Vike 2002).

Amid all this disciplinary activity, politicians and bureaucrats find ways to work around the strictures of meeting-speech. Breaks in meetings provide a moment for at least the partial relaxation of the rules of segregation and orderly speech of the meeting itself. As I noted at the time in my field-notes:

‘Breaks in meetings always seem to be the most interesting part. You sit through an hour of patronizing detail about how to distinguish goals from objectives (again) and everyone is terribly well behaved, and then in the break they reveal that they think it is rubbish or silly.’

It was during one such meeting-break that an opposition politician, Knut, reflected on his participation in a cabinet policy-making process as representative of a minor party in the district. He explained how difficult it was to be only one person representing real opposition, always

being in the position of having to present alternatives or different models to those presented by the Mayor or chair of committee. He described the process of policy making as a cycle of meeting and dispersing, as he doodled for me a set of interlocking diamonds onto a scrap of paper (figure 2). The diagram illustrated a creative process that moves away from a point, coming back together to make a choice, then moving away for more creative work, and so on, and also represents the gathering in a meeting and referring back to a broader constituency (such as his party group). Decisions that happen at meetings illustrate the point of punctuation in this process, as noted above.

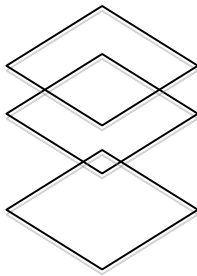


Figure 2:

The model could also describe the learning trajectory of politicians as they learn to make sense of political process over time. Experienced politicians tend to distill what they describe as the business from the performance, but they have learned that the performance has its own value, even if it does not change immediate decisions. The formality of naming the Mayor while looking at him prior to launching into a speech becomes automatic, and yet it remains a crucial element of the meeting procedure. Each time it is said, the participants are reminded that the chair of the meeting is in the chair as an honorary role, aside from their role of representing a political position: they are there to keep order and to confirm the official authority of any discussions held in the meeting. At the same time, the Mayor is reminded in this fashion that he or she holds the trust of the participants to retain order in proceedings, to give each a fair hearing according to the rules. Abuse of that trust is probably the most serious thing that a chair can do wrong, and in the political process it can have real consequences, including dismissal or other disciplinary action. Abuse of trust brings political procedure into the realms of the legal system, whereas on an ordinary basis, political decisions are rarely taken to the courts. Where it does happen, it is widely reported, and yet the attention given to cases where legal action ensues reflects how unusual this really is in practice. These repeated practices ensure that the lessons that have been learned about meeting personas and behavior are regularly reinforced.

Learning by playing

While learning as an adult participant is part of the induction into political life and is an arena for the reproduction of political forms and practices, there have been various initiatives to try to initiate younger people into the ideas and practices of democracy through inviting them into council meetings in different ways, as well as mimicking council meeting practices elsewhere⁷. Many schools in the UK and Norway have student-councils and some hold mock-general elections. Particularly in Norway, several political parties have youth wings, and in both countries universities often provide training grounds for aspiring politicians. The Oxford Union, for example, is one of the more notoriously elitist institutions that acts as a practice-chamber for British parliamentarians, while more inclusive student unions in other universities provide opportunities for political engagement alongside the provision of various kinds of welfare services. The UN has long had a student council (in which my own mother participated as a medical student at Manchester University in the late 1940s). Pedagogical approaches to introducing young people into democratic practice are hardly new, but it is instructive to examine the forms they take today, and the kinds of lessons that participants learn in these preparatory contexts. Activities such as the youth council form part of a much wider approach to what is sometimes called civic engagement in Norway (or what Anderson refers to as 'civil sociality' in Denmark, 2011). While participation in public life is sometimes measured through the proportion of the population who belong to associations (Tranvik and Selle 2005)⁸, explicit pedagogical activities organised by municipalities via the schools under their administration⁹ specifically aim to educate children about democracy through practice.

In this section, I recount one such program, which could be thought to collapse the notions of democracy, citizenship, and meeting-practice into one arena. This example forms one of two models for educational experience of democratic practices. In the school environment, role play and learning through experience are implicit in activities such as mock-elections, in which pupils take on the role of candidates representing different partners, urging their peers to vote for them. Such role-plays offer the opportunity to learn about the process of democracy, and its practicalities, since participants must adhere to a set of electoral rules that mimic national elections. Schools councils, on the other hand, are as much an experience of direct democracy as they are a pedagogical tool. In school councils (here I generalize for the sake of brevity), school students elect representatives who participate in school-governance, participating in committees at different levels. In Norway, since the 1990s at least, some municipalities have also established regular youth councils, of two key sorts. Both translate into English as 'council', but one type could be termed a youth advisory board (ungdomsråd) while the other is a mirror to the municipal council (De Unges Kommunestyre, DUK). In the former, young people (not

necessarily school representatives – recruitment and election strategies vary) are invited to join a board of young people who scrutinize the policies and decisions of the municipal council to ensure that they do not cause difficulties or disadvantages to young people in the municipality. They are an advisory and scrutiny committee who meet regularly to be consulted on policy and may be supported by a children's Ombudsman, for example. In both cases, participants are taught how to function through the medium of meetings, how to understand agendas and meeting papers, link one meeting to the next, and make arguments and interventions in public debates. In this section, I show how students learn to behave in municipal-meeting style, which provides not only training for future politicians, but a means to interpret municipal meetings that students may later encounter.

The DUK is an arena in which school representatives may take their seats in the council chamber in a youth-version of the full municipal council. While in some instances this is a purely symbolic activity, in others the youth council is offered a budget and the opportunity to make decisions on how that budget should be disbursed. In the municipality of Asker, which has since the 1970s become a wealthy commuter district for Oslo, the Youth Council has the power to manage a budget that is confirmed on an annual basis. The Youth Council meets annually, and in many respects mimics the full council. It includes the same number of representatives as the full council (47 members in the year 2000, expanded to 53 in 2014), from primary and secondary schools and is led by the Mayor, and meets in the council chamber. The stated aim is to promote the interests of children and young people in the district, to encourage the participation of students in their school and in the district, to give them some degree of influence in decisions that affect them and encourage in them a sense of responsibility for their own neighborhoods, as well as offering a forum for dialogue between young people and the leadership of the council. As with council meetings, the Youth Council is held in public, with papers available freely from the council's website. Contemporary Youth Councils are broadcast live on the council's website, where videos of councils since 2007 remain available (<https://www.asker.kommune.no/Lokalpolitikk/Video-fra-kommunestyret/> accessed 27.2.15).

The description below is of a youth council held in 2000, although by all accounts it continues in a similar form today. In this case, schools in the district are invited by the municipal council to participate in the council. Schools agree to hold competitions in which groups of pupils propose projects with budgets that fall within the overall budget for the youth council. In each school, therefore, a competition was set up, where students were invited to propose projects that would be funded through the municipal youth-council budget. School-councils considered proposals and held elections, often holding rounds by school-year and then between school-years in the schools. Winning project groups then competed in each school sub-district, to come forward to

the Youth Council in the town hall. By all accounts, the competition in several schools was fierce. By the time the successful groups came together to present their ideas at the youth-council in the town hall in late March, they were well prepared, each group bringing models or posters to illustrate the projects they hoped to get funded, and having practiced their presentations in previous rounds.

On a chilly day in late March 2000, children from the ages of around 11 to 18 gathered in the town hall council chamber. The austere modernist 1960s concrete building, with its dark-grey pebble-dashed walls decorated with a row of gold framed formal classical oil portraits of former mayors, an abstract relief behind the chair's table at the front of the hall, and low-level lights glowing on dark-wooden benches arranged in ranks on three sides of the room. Despite the subdued surroundings, the excitement and nervousness of the participants was palpable in the livelier than usual atmosphere. All the students were accompanied, either by school staff or parents, who were invited to sit in the observers' chairs at the back of the hall. The Mayor called the meeting to order from the front bench of the chamber with the council secretary at his side, welcoming the students, introducing the agenda and explaining the basics of council meeting procedures. Every meeting begins with a register, he explained, to check who is there, and that they are sitting in the right place, and so that everyone knows who everyone else is. The register was then called with names read out school by school, a process that took half an hour. One young boy was told by the council secretary that he could not sit at the table, since his school had only registered one representative, and could therefore only have one seat. His teacher asked if it would be all right for him to sit at the table during the meeting anyway, and was told that this would be acceptable, but that he would not have a vote and must sit back from the table, so that the secretary knew which was the authorized representative. The embarrassed boy sat timidly back from the table, while the teacher looked pained at the rather brusque dismissal of the boy's attempt to participate. It was clear to all that rules and regulations must be attended to, and that this was not an occasion on which 'anything goes', or exceptions could be made merely to be nice to children.

The Mayor continued, outlining the rules of participation: one should only speak to/through the Mayor, addressing him as 'Mr Mayor', and not addressing other participants directly; they should keep to the point at hand and not start talking about other things, they should be concise and keep to the time limits allocated to each speaker. After this introduction, the Mayor announced a break, for all the participants to admire the models and posters that the groups had brought along, and the students tumbled into the adjoining foyer to see the projects, and try to convince each other to support their proposals. During the break, two girls came over to talk to me, who had participated in a two-day project called 'Vi Bryr Oss', or 'We Care', earlier in the

month. This was a government sponsored project that was sent out to districts nationally, intended to give general education on democracy, teach students how to be listened to, using internet and television (video). Students had been invited to participate, and to make short films about their views, to be shared later with others in the district through the council website and various showings. The project had been managed locally by Guri, an Education Officer from the council. Her work fell within the council's priority area of coordinating services for children and youth, and she was vehement about the importance of including young people in municipal activities, including the Youth Advisory Board, which, as mentioned above, was a committee made up of young people in the municipality to who review all policy for its potential effects on young people in the district.

The girls had enjoyed the preparations for the youth council, they told me, having practiced giving speeches and prepared keywords that they might need. They had prepared a film during Vi Bryr Oss, but were disappointed not to be able to show it to the council, since the project organizers were still working on the editing. The slow turnaround was something that Guri was privately very critical of, since she felt that rapid response was essential. Young people need to see results quickly, she argued, for them to believe in them. Today, though, she was positive, enthusiastic and encouraging. When the girls saw the Mayor come into the room, they called out to him by his first name, 'Morten, Morten!', and he came over to chat, asking them with genuine interest about the project, about their ideas for a youth-disco and about the Youth Council. In fact, they had a long conversation about how they might organize a disco, and where it could be located, whether it should be in one of the smaller villagers or central in the main town, which age group it should be for, whether the decoration in the existing youth café was too light for a disco, and so forth. He sat in the chair in front of them, leaning on the chair back to talk to them, and he received their ideas constructively, and not patronizingly. In encouraging them to talk about their ideas, he demonstrated that he took them seriously, and also practiced political deliberation, showing that the Town Hall was a place for discussing ideas and proposals, giving them room to develop. At the same time, he gently brought in limitations and external concerns. When the girls started to talk to him about plans for a new swimming pool in the district, they said that they thought it shouldn't be a boring pool where people swim up and down, but should have slides and so on. He explained the costs of such a project, and said that although the council had tried to bring in a private developer, this had not happened, so their ideal pool would be too expensive.

After they went to get refreshments, the Mayor asked for my opinion, and I acknowledged that I was impressed. 'They are very confident', said the Mayor, 'so well prepared and smart'. He would never have had the confidence to speak at the council at their age, he said, and he was

impressed by them. The council had put up a real budget, of NOK100,000 (around £10,000, or \$13,000), and this had not been a difficult decision. However, the students' ideas were getting increasingly ambitious, so the total budget would have to be reviewed (in 2014 the budget had reached NOK300,000). In particular, the older students were bringing bigger projects forward each year, which he took as a sign of developing talent. The scale of projects had been a little controversial, though. Guri explained that in a previous project in Oslo, she had teachers calling to ask how they could get their projects through the Youth Council, and she had had to explain that the Youth Council was for young people to be heard, not for teachers and parents to get their projects approved. There had been some controversy around some of the projects put forward in this DUK, too, with accusations that some parents had been pushing their local projects forward as student projects. For the organizers of the DUK, this pressure on young people was interpreted as akin to exploitation, and against the spirit of self-determination that the Youth Council and DUK sought to establish. Guri also explained that the Mayor was exceptionally good at the role, treating the students with respect, and being supportive and encouraging, and remaining genial throughout the process. This pedagogical approach was crucial to the success of the DUK, since the key element was that all the students should feel that their voices had been heard and their ideas taken seriously, whether or not they were eventually successful in the vote.

Returning to the chamber after the break, each group was invited in turn to walk to the speaker's podium and present their project, using overhead slides if they wished, and giving an argument for why it should be funded rather than other projects. Groups were given five minutes each to present, but most of the groups presented their ideas very briefly, with little detail, using only two or three of the minutes at their disposal, much the opposite of the methods used by adult politicians in the normal council meetings. The proposals were put forward very positively, that is, not using threats or warnings of dire consequences if their proposals were ignored, as adult politicians sometimes do. One boy waxed almost lyrical about the idyllic place where his group lived, close to a lake and with access through a canal to two more lakes where they could bathe. But bathing could be dull in the end, so they proposed putting in facilities, canoes, a jetty, beach-volleyball, and a boat so that kids from all over the district could come and enjoy this lovely place. Another group presented their project using powerpoint slides, but with no comment, and the Mayor responded with complements for a very elegant presentation, but advised them that it would be more persuasive if they talked about it too. One group proposed buying video cameras to loan out for kids to record all the interesting things going on in the area, and another suggested sporting facilities, and a music studio, which would be better than sitting at home watching tv (in 2000, this pre-dated the rapid expansion of digital home equipment). Once each group had presented their ideas, the debate adjourned for lunch.

Over lunch, negotiations started to get more serious. Two slightly older boys started to try to put together a joint proposal including projects from each zone of the district, to try to get something for everyone rather than all the money going to one big project, leaving other areas with nothing. There was one of the smaller projects, and they clearly were attempting to ensure their project was funded by gathering support from similarly sized projects. Another group of older students attempted to persuade younger participants to side with their projects, offering them small concessions in return for their support. Some of the younger participants were upset by this cattle-trading, feeling pressured to give way to bigger students, and bigger projects. Having imbibed the rhetoric of fair process, self-determination, even competition, and so on, the reality of corridor politics and deal-making was an unpleasant jolt to some of them. While the older and more confident students operated in classic political mode, their clever operations made the others appear naïve and idealistic. Had they really thought that their proposals would just be put forward and then voted on without further comment?

Another session in the chamber offered all the students the opportunity to ask questions of the other groups, and defend their own projects in response to questions or comments. In each case, a spokesperson for the group walked to the speaker's podium, bringing notes to refer to and speaking into the microphone on the podium for a limited number of minutes. They had been well prepared, and understood the way they should present their ideas, and how to refer to proposals by reference number, for example. Some were nervous, hesitating and breathless, while others were confident, even charismatic, testing out their chosen persona at the podium.

After this round of debate, at the end of the day, a vote was called, with each group presenting the number of transferable votes they were giving to each project. Once all the votes were tallied, the Mayor announced that the Youth Council had decided to fund a centrally-located music studio, and to contribute towards football equipment in one district, and ice-hockey equipment in another. The outcome of the vote was later reported in the local newspaper, which regularly reported on local council debates (debates that were also televised – and watched). As the newspaper reported, the aim of the whole process was obviously to teach the students to participate in a democratic process of prioritization. They could propose concrete, short-term policies for improvements in their neighborhoods, or to develop the district as a better place to live. The selected proposals would be implemented in the period April to June the same year. In repeating the council's press-release in this way, the local news media helped to secure the concept of the DUK as a pedagogical exercise with real intent and concrete outcomes but it also helped to naturalize the council's broader political approach, in the context of what was then a coalition council between Conservative and neoLiberal parties. Their overall philosophy entailed a rhetoric of transferring responsibility for the district from the council, as an administrative

organism, to the citizens, or in their terms, away from dependency, and towards a balance between rights and responsibilities (see Abram 2007b).

While the rhetoric surrounding this event was about empowering young people to speak for themselves and to do so through the mechanisms and forms of local government, there were several kinds of learning going on. Students were learning the practices of municipal association – when to speak, how to address the chair, how to behave appropriately in the council chamber, and so on. This was the explicit aim of the exercise, from the municipality's point of view. At the same time, though, students were learning some harsh lessons about realpolitik, how deals are brokered, how pressure is exerted and experienced in the political process, and how stronger individuals can intimidate others. One could argue that for some of the students, much of the learning was about how to be a political actor, and how effective political actors operate. Some of the younger and less confident students were upset by the brash force with which older boys¹⁰, in particular, pushed their own agendas. Intimidating tactics were experienced as unpleasant, and some of the students turned to the teachers supporting the event for help. They were not given a great deal of sympathy, instead being left to understand that this was the tough world of politics. For some students, the experience of alienation led them to state that they would not get involved again, and feeling that the whole system was unfair, but others were clearly getting a taste for the fray. Students were discovering their abilities or limitations as political actors, identifying the possibilities for democratic activity, and recognizing the way that some students could behave in powerful ways. It wasn't clear whether the nerve-racking experience of speaking in public helped some of the students to gain in confidence, but it seemed apparent that the process affected them in different ways. Becoming disillusioned constituted an important experience for some of the participants.

The pedagogical framework itself can be understood as being mixed. It promised students a voice through a supportive democratic structure, yet enabled them to learn through experience how political deals are done in practice, how much back-room bargaining is entailed, and how far some participants were prepared to intimidate others for their own interests, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes with hidden agendas. The concrete outcomes of the democratic process were intrinsic, ensuring that participants would see real results for themselves in a timescale that was meaningful to school-students (in contrast to much council business whose outcomes could be difficult to isolate from other influences, including national and international laws and regulations and broader socio-economic contextual factors). These apparently conflicting messages suggested an ambivalence about political processes, demonstrating that it requires participants to play by rules, but also to play with and around the rules if they were to be effective political actors.

Conclusions: Learning by/and doing

The two examples discussed in this paper offer an insight into the varied registers of learning how to meet. In the Youth Council an expressly pedagogical intent was orchestrated by the local authority through the practice of political process in a controlled setting. The rules were clear and simplified, since only one budget was to be debated, and only one proposal per group was to be considered. There were no political party groupings in evidence, and consequences were relatively immediate. The exercise was set up to ensure that students should see the meeting of the council as the arena in which their voices could be heard and decisions could be made based on the hearing of information, and students were supposed to see how they could develop a political persona and imagine themselves as future politicians. Yet in practice, of course, the peripheral hard lessons of politics were also glimpsed; some participants felt that they had not done their proposals justice, some felt pressured by more powerful groups, while others began to get a taste for doing deals and practicing realpolitik.

As a pedagogical project, its explicit intention was that the students should learn about democratic process, but there is little doubt that many adult politicians in the daily life of council politics are also learning through doing. Not only the deputies pictured at the start of the chapter, whose learning was again explicit, but also the long-standing elected representatives who continue to discipline and self-discipline from meeting to meeting (see Abram 2007a, 2004). Bureaucrats, too, gradually learn – both by experience and from colleagues – how to behave in meetings, how to prepare effectively, and how to cope with the discipline that the council meeting form imposes upon them. In their restrained behavior, bureaucrats practice bodily the separation of powers that defines the Norwegian political system. This provides particular challenges for those who, unlike in the British system, for example, play both roles – as elected representatives also employed by the municipality in bureaucratic roles. These individuals are constantly on guard against themselves, asking themselves who they are speaking for in any meeting. If they cannot learn to master this discipline, they are obliged to stand down from one of the roles for the sake of political correctness (literally).

Participants in meetings learn to invoke the authority of the state through repeated practices of using role-names, referring to other meetings, choosing political rhetoric for symbolic effect, referring to statutes, regulations, shared knowledge or norms. In invoking the state in this way, they reinforce the impression that it exists. Such practices must be done with skill that is learned largely through participation, observation and experience. The skills learned are constantly tested, since meetings are not always predictable. They could therefore be understood as classic

social skills – without delving into detailed debates about social practice, it is useful to invoke the idea that social action is a kind of improvisation or extemporization building on learned patterns and categories applied in new ways.

People learn how to accord with the practice of municipal meetings through direct pedagogy and social coercion, often observed through situated peripheral participation and what is sometimes called trial and error. These clearly demonstrate that local authority meeting-practices can be explored as a form of learned, adapted and complex behaviors, that politicians and administrators are constantly feeling their way around, improving their skills and testing in new circumstances. This involves the pushing and building of roles and their boundaries, self-scrutiny and attempts to fit in with sometimes very restricted opportunities for self-expression. The particular practices described from Norwegian municipal contexts show how moral norms of political behaviour – strict separation of politics and administration, avoidance of nepotism, bribery or other forms of corruption, emphasizing equalities and participatory democracy, and so on – are regularly enacted in performance of meetings. Just as the health workers described in Schwartzmann's ethnography of the meeting were making their organization real through meeting in and about it, municipal actors are creating the state in the image of normative democratic ideals, tempered by their experience of everyday politics.

Identifying local authority meetings as an ethnographic object thus offers insight into political practice and the normalization of state presence, and the legitimizing effects of routine governance practices. As these actors produce the state through their practices, they are simultaneously discovering and negotiating the extent to which they share a vision of what the state could, and should be. One might argue that much of the political process consists of just this – the tussle over defining what the state is, where its limits are and what its role in civic life should be. Recognizing the learning that practitioners engage in at each meeting highlights that the state consists of practices that are constantly in production, contributing to the current focus on ontological approaches in the social sciences, and showing how the legitimacy and authority of government is reproduced.

Notes.

1. “The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.” (Abrams 1988:58).
2. Based on ethnographic fieldwork mostly between 1997 and 2005. Fieldwork in 2000 was made possible by a visiting fellowship from the Department of Anthropology of the University of Oslo.
3. in what Appadurai calls ‘regimes of value’ (1986).

4. Norwegian elections use a system of direct proportional representation. According to official guidance: “The Norwegian electoral system is based on the principles of direct election and proportional representation in multi-member electoral divisions. Direct election means that the electors vote directly for representatives of their constituency by giving their vote to an electoral list. Proportional representation means that the representatives are distributed according to the relationship to one another of the individual electoral lists in terms of the number of votes they have received. Both political parties and other groups can put up lists at elections.” From the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization.

<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/portal/election-portal/the-norwegian-electoral-system/id456636/>
(Accessed 10 Jan 2016)

5. The two small settlements differed mainly by location – one at the fjord's edge, the other high in the valley. The former had better communications (regular visiting boats, closer roads) and was the seat of the council; the latter had more employment as well as a larger farming community. Little else distinguished them. A football field was equidistant between the two settlements.

6. Religious adherence varies across the country, with some areas of particularly strong religious fervor referred to as 'the bible belt', notably around the Southern coast and some way up the West coast. Norway has a protestant state church, with strong Lutheran influence, as well as more puritanical sects (particularly around the southern and western coasts).

7. Levinson (2011) outlines a history of education in 'civics', pointing out how little anthropological attention it has attracted from educational anthropology.

8. In common with other European countries such as Finland and France: see Alapuro 2005.

9. Almost all schools in Norway are state run, although recent educational reforms seek to establish a private school sector.

10. I have not focused specifically on gender in this article, but this does not imply that it is not a significant issue in this context.

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